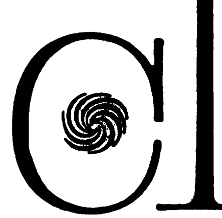




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ZHANG LONGXI

The Letter or the Spirit: The *Song of Songs*, Allegoresis, and the *Book of Poetry*

Do not interpretations belong to God?
Gen. 40:8

WHEN I FIRST read the Song of Solomon in the quaint and melodious English of the King James Version, I was filled with surprise at the beauty of its rich imagery and astonishingly sensuous language, and even more so at its inclusion in the austere and august Holy Scriptures. How could anyone fail to be affected by the power of such verses?

Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame.

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned.
(8:6-7)

The expressions of a passionate love in the Song impressed me so deeply that I was delighted to find critical opinions like that of George Saintsbury who said, with special reference to the verses just quoted, that "I know no more perfect example of English prose rhythm than the famous verses of the last chapter of the Canticles in the Authorized Version" (32). There is no doubt in my mind that the Song of Songs deserves to be placed among the most refined pieces of love poetry in world litera-

ture, but its inclusion in the Holy Scriptures must give us pause in taking it to be the same kind of human writing as secular love poems.

In fact, it is precisely the presence of a love song in the Bible that has raised the hermeneutic problem for all exegetes throughout the centuries, Jews and Christians alike. The problem is not that the Canticle sings of love, but that it surpasses many secular love poems in its praise of feminine beauty, its unmistakably erotic imagery, its oriental sensuality, and the conspicuous absence of God from the whole text. In other translations like the *Jerusalem Bible*, the name of God does appear once in 8:6 where the Hebrew word *šalhebetyah*, which corresponds to "a most vehement flame" in the Authorized Version, is rendered as "a flame of Yahweh himself." But Marvin Pope believes that "to seize upon the final consonants *yh* as the sole reference to the God of Israel in the entire Canticle is to lean on very scanty and shaky support" (671). The language of the Song of Songs is the secular language of love. It speaks of the desire and the joy of love, the physical charms of the beloved, jewels and spices, wine and milk, the dove, the rose, the lily, the sweet-smelling myrrh, the grape vines, the apple and the fig tree, the roe and the young hart, but not the usual biblical language of law and covenant, the fear and worship of God, or sin and forgiveness. The uniqueness of the Song of Songs in the biblical context must be explained, and indeed the history of its interpretation is a long record of controversies.

The canonicity of the Song has not gone unchallenged. At the council of Jamnia at the end of the first century, the rabbis discussed the holiness, or lack of it, of the two books ascribed to Solomon, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. Rabbi Judah argued that the Song of Songs defiled the hands, i.e., was taboo or sacred, hence canonical, while Ecclesiastes did not. Rabbi Jose then expressed his doubt about the propriety of including the Song in the canon, but Rabbi Aquiba made a powerful plea, saying, "No man of Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs, that it did not defile the hands. The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies." He angrily denounced those who treated this holy Song as an ordinary song (*zemîr*) and chanted it in "Banquet Houses." This does not mean, however, that the Song had remained outside the canon till that time, for "the issue was not whether the book was included in the Canon, but whether it should have been" (Pope 19). Among Christians, similar doubts and disputes arise from time to time. Calvin's fellow reformer Sebastian Castellio revived the view of Theodore of Mopsuestia, which had been condemned by the Roman Church, that the Song was Solomon's rejoinder to popular protest against his unconventional marriage to an Egyptian princess; therefore it dealt with nothing but earthly af-

fections. An eighteenth-century rationalist, William Whiston, even asserted that the Song "exhibits from the beginning to the end marks of folly, vanity, and looseness," that "it was written by Solomon when He was become Wicked and Foolish, and Lascivious, and Idolatrous (Pope 129). Many of those who question the canonicity of the Song tend to read it as a song about secular love or as Solomon's colloquy with his mistress, and as such they regard it as unworthy of inclusion in the Holy Scriptures. For them, the literal sense of the Song is incompatible with its canonical status.

The fundamental way to justify the canonicity of the Song of Songs, among both Jews and Christians, has always been to read the text as an allegory, a piece of writing which does not mean what it literally says. When Rabbi Aquiba insisted that the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies, he "must have understood the Song allegorically," as Marvin Pope points out (19). In the Jewish tradition, the Song of Songs is understood as celebrating the love between God and Israel. Such a claim obviously has to be substantiated through an interpretation which would somehow relate what is described in the Song of Songs either to God or to Israel as his Beloved, or to heroic figures in Israel's legendary history. In "Midrash Rabbah," for instance, the "two breasts" in 4:5 are identified with Moses and Aaron because "just as the breasts are the beauty and the ornament of a woman, so Moses and Aaron were the beauty and ornament of Israel"; and later the "navel" of the Beloved is said to represent the Sanhedrin on the ground that when it met, its members sat in a semi-circle, forming a center of such great importance in Jewish society, as the midrashist writes, that "just as the embryo so long as it is in its mother's womb lives only from its navel, so Israel can do nothing without their Sanhedrin" (Freedman and Simon 198, 281). However bizarre it may sound to our ears, such identification is nonetheless justifiable if Israel is indeed the beloved woman in the Song. Nevertheless, when commenting on verse 2:7, "I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem," the midrashist does not identify the Beloved either with Israel or with individual Israelites, but identifies her with God Himself (Freedman and Simon 112). How can the Beloved be allegorically both God and Israel in one and the same song? In the host of rabbinic exegeses, such inconsistencies are by no means rare, and yet they apparently did not bother the ingenious midrashist at all. James Kugel explains that

> what the midrashist addressed himself to was not first and foremost the book as a whole, i.e. not the allegory itself—"Granted, it is a love song about God and Israel" —but single verses, isolated in suspended animation. If the precise wording of a verse suggested an interpretive tack that would violate the overall allegorical frame, the midrashist sometimes picked up the suggestion nonetheless. For the

same reason, of course, midrashic collections do not scruple at assembling different solutions to the same "problem" in a verse, even though they may contradict one another: it is not that one is right and the others wrong, but that all are adequate "smoothings-over." (Kugel, "Two Introductions")

In other words, one can hardly say that midrash is already full-fledged allegory. Its chief interest lies in ironing out textual irregularities in single verses rather than in structuring a coherent account of the meaning of entire texts. For the midrashist, it is not so much the overall structure as the rich detail that constitutes the sacredness of Scripture. Nothing is superfluous, and yet nothing is obvious, so that a correct understanding must be attained by making ingenious connections between single verses, by manipulating words and their syntactic relations, thus explaining away any dissonance between the Jewish religion and the sacred book on which it is supposed to stand. In his exegetical practice, the midrashist often exploits the resources of the literal to the utmost so as to reinforce his own reading of a particular verse, but he need not always stick to an overall allegorical structure. Such a structure appears only gradually when exegeses of single verses merge into the shape of a consistent totality in the later development of rabbinic interpretation.

In the Aramaic translation and interpretation of the Song, known as the Targum to the Song of Songs (c. 636-638), the divine love motif, long existent in the rabbinic tradition and particularly promoted by Rabbi Aquiba, is fully developed into a fairly consistent allegorical narrative of Jewish history from the Exodus to the impending advent of the Messiah. For example, the text of 1:5 reads: "I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon." The Targumic elaboration of this verse, as Raphael Loewe recapitulates it, identifies the speaker who is at once black and comely with Israel in her ancient historical context:

"When . . . the house of Israel made the golden calf, their faces turned black as the Ethiopians . . . but when they returned in penitence and their sin was forgiven them, the effulgence of the glory of their faces did increase to be bright as that of the angels, both in virtue of their penitence and because they made curtains for the tabernacle, and so the Presence of the Lord came to dwell amongst them: and [also because] Moses, their teacher, had gone up to heaven and had effected peace between them and their King." The three basic elements in the Targum's exegesis are thus *black* in sin, *fair* in penitence, and the reconciliation effected by means of the *curtains* of the tabernacle with "Solomon"—that is, with the King of peace. (175)

The Targum in its accepted form emerged partly as development of the motif of divine love in Jewish tradition and partly as a response to Christian allegorization. Having taken the motif from the Jews, the Christians had given it a new twist and read the Canticle as representing

the love between Christ and the new Israel, i.e., the Church. Following Paul's hermeneutic principle of eschatological typology, the early Christian exegetes had no difficulty in substituting the Church for Israel as the receiver of God's love. Christian allegorization flourished in Alexandria where Hellenistic culture provided an important backdrop for the exegesis of biblical texts. Greek philosophers, notably the Stoics, had long been engaged in allegorical readings of the Homeric epics in order to find out the deeper meanings that underlie the myths and to justify the sometimes seemingly indecent or irresponsible behavior of the gods. According to K. J. Woollcombe, Greek allegorization assumes two different forms: "(1) positive allegorism, the object of which is to elucidate the undersenses of the myths, and (2) negative allegorism, the object of which is to defend morally offensive passages"; whereas "the main object of Christian allegorism has always been to elucidate the secondary, hidden meaning of the Old Testament, rather than to defend its primary and obvious meaning against charges of immorality" (51, 52). In the case of the Song of Songs, however, the positive and the negative aspects of allegorism cannot be separated from one another: the apologetic motif is as important as the elucidation of a deeper meaning, and is indeed substantiated only through such elucidation.

This seems to me very clear in Origen's Commentary and Homilies on the Canticle of Canticles, i.e., Song of Songs, which are characteristic of the Alexandrian allegorical method and commanded great admiration from later writers like Jerome. Many of Origen's writings are lost, mainly because they were condemned by the emperor Justinian I in 543 A.D., and his Commentary and Homilies on the Song now survive only in partial Latin translations. However, we may get some idea of the tremendous importance of his works, especially those on the Song of Songs, from Jerome's famous tribute that "while Origen surpassed all writers in his other books, in his *Song of Songs* he surpassed himself" (Origen, *Commentary and Homilies* 265). Despite his later rejection of many of Origen's theological views, Jerome did not revise this high estimation. Jerome chose to translate the two Homilies instead of the major Commentary, probably because in the Homilies the Bride in the Song is identified with the Church, while in the Commentary this identification always goes hand in hand with the interpretation that the marriage also symbolizes the mystical union of Christ and the soul. It is owing to Rufinus that we now have the Latin version of Origen's Commentary.

Origen begins his Commentary with a generic definition of the Song as "an epithalamium, that is to say, a marriage-song, which Solomon wrote in the form of a drama and sang under the figure of the Bride, about to wed and burning with heavenly love towards her Bridegroom, who is the Word of God" (21). The last part of this definition is espe-

cially noteworthy as it claims that the nature of love is "heavenly" and that the bridegroom is "the Word of God." The bride, according to Origen, is either the Church or the soul of individual Christians. He firmly bases his allegorization on the Pauline dichotomy of the letter and the spirit (2 Cor. 3:6) or the spiritual and the carnal (1 Cor. 3:1). When Paul contrasts the letter of the Mosaic Law with the spirit of Christian faith, declaring that the epistle of Christ is "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart" (2 Cor. 3:3), he is concerned not so much with positing an exegetical rule as with defining the Christian position toward Judaism in terms of his Christocentric theology. In rejecting Jewish legalism, Paul contrasts it with the new Christian faith not merely as letter and spirit, but as death and life. This dichotomy, however, soon becomes a hermeneutic principle not only of how to conceive of Judaism in the Christian perspective but how to read Scripture allegorically in its spiritual sense. According to this principle, Origen is able to insist that the description of physical charms in the Song "can in no way be applied to the visible body, but must be referred to the parts and powers of the invisible soul" (*Commentary and Homilies* 28). He believes that "just as the human being consists of body, soul, and spirit, so does Scripture which God has arranged to be given for the salvation of humankind" ("On First Principles" II.4.58). In actual exegesis, however, he almost exclusively emphasizes the spiritual meaning on the ground that concerning Scripture "all of it has a spiritual sense, but not all of it has a bodily sense. In fact, in many cases the bodily sense proves to be impossible" ("On First Principles" III.5.67). He insists that the literal or bodily sense should simply be eliminated from the Song so that the spiritual meaning may unfold itself before the discerning eyes of the faithful and that the sexual element may be minimized. Origen argues that the three books attributed to Solomon are so arranged in the Old Testament that the Proverbs teach first the subject of morals, and then Ecclesiastes discusses natural things and warns against vanity, and finally the Song of Songs deals with the subject of contemplation. In this divinely inspired Song, Solomon "instils into the soul the love of things divine and heavenly, using for his purpose the figure of the Bride and Bridegroom, and teaches us that communion with God must be attained by the paths of charity and love" (*Commentary and Homilies* 41).

The search for the *sensus spiritualis* is undoubtedly a positive object in itself, but the apologetic motif is quite evident in Origen's deep concern that the Song should first be carefully interpreted and properly seasoned with allegory before it is offered as spiritual food to the Christian reader. Or rather, it is the reader who must be properly prepared and educated before he touches the Song. Otherwise there is "no small

hazard and danger" in this sacred book, and the untrained reader may regard the book as giving him carte blanche for debauchery:

> For he, not knowing how to hear love's language in purity and with chaste ears, will twist the whole manner of his hearing of it away from the inner spiritual man and on to the outward and carnal; and he will be turned away from the spirit to the flesh, and will foster carnal desires in himself, and it will seem to be the Divine Scriptures that are thus urging and egging him on to fleshly lust!
>
> For this reason, therefore, I advice and counsel everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature, to refrain completely from reading this little book and the things that will be said about it. (*Commentary and Homilies* 22-23)

We can almost feel Origen's anxiety throbbing in this "advice and counsel." He seems to feel abhorrence at the thought that a holy book of the Bible could in any way encourage secular love and lead the reader to the lusts of the flesh. He is anxious to defend the Song of Songs against its accusers by revealing its spiritual sense and thereby dismissing all charges of pernicious influence and immorality. In his allegorization, the epithalamium is the bodily form of the Canticle, and its spiritual meaning intimates the mystical union of Christ and the Church or Christ and the soul. We have seen that the midrashist interpreted the "two breasts" of the bride as representing Moses and Aaron; similarly in commenting on verse 1:13, "he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts," Origen tells the reader to understand the "breasts" as "the ground of the heart in which the Church holds Christ, or the soul holds the Word of God" (*Commentary and Homilies* 165). When the text speaks about the "bed" in the sense of her body she shares with her lover, he explains that "you must understand this in the light of the figure that Paul also uses when he says that *our bodies are members of Christ*" (*Commentary and Homilies* 173). When the depiction of the love scene seems explicit, as in 2:6, "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me," he promptly warns the reader not to take it literally: "you must not understand the left and right hands of the Word of God in a corporeal sense, simply because He is called the Bridegroom, which is an epithet of male significance. Nor must you take the Bride's embraces in that way, simply because the word 'bride' is of feminine gender" (*Commentary and Homilies* 200-201). In the second Homily, Origen explains that "the Word of God has both a left hand and a right," therefore the meaning of the verse is that "He may cause me to rest, that the Bridegroom's arm may be my pillow and the chief seat of the soul recline upon the Word of God" (*Commentary and Homilies* 297-98). In such an ascetic allegorical reading, the male-female relationship is aptly evaporated, all sensual imagery effaced, and any possible suggestion of

eroticism utterly eliminated together with the literal sense of the biblical text.

As allegory etymologically means "speaking of the other," in reading *this* we should then understand it as *that*. Of the four levels (or the four-fold scheme) of meaning, which constitute the theoretical foundation of biblical allegory, the least important or relevant to true understanding, according to the allegorists, is the literal sense. The revelation of the Spirit must be at the cost of the suppression of the Letter. For Origen and his followers, the written word should be cast off and forgotten in order to free the spirit of the Logos from the shell of human language.

The way Christian exegetes use allegorization in order to read the Song of Songs as a theologically meaningful and morally edifying composition and thereby to justify its canonicity bears striking similarities to the way many traditional Chinese scholars read part of the Confucian canon, *Shi Jing* or the *Book of Poetry*. As the first anthology of Chinese verse compiled by Confucius himself (a legend the great historian Sima Qian recorded in Confucius's biography), the *Book of Poetry* occupies a tremendously important place in ancient Chinese culture, comparable to that of the Homeric epics or the Bible in the Western world. "As Greek poets and philosophers often cited Homer to endorse their argument or as the Christians hold the Old and the New Testaments as their guide in life," remarks Zheng Zhenduo, a famous Chinese writer and scholar, "so would our ancient statesmen and literati turn to a verse or two from the *Book of Poetry* as ground for their views in debate or admonition, or as evidence in their promulgation or argument" (1:36). For a work of literature, however, canonization may well prove to be a burden or even a curse. When poetry is thought to give us divine knowledge, virtue, and wisdom, we cease to read it as poetry, but read it instead as religion, ethics, or philosophy. That is to say, we begin to read it as allegory. In late antiquity, as James Kugel observes, "allegory, set to apologetic purposes, eventually became *the* way of talking about Homer, and an integral part of that *paideia*"; and "Scripture too lent itself to such a reading . . . a special sort of informed reading, one keen to the text's 'other speaking' " ("The 'Bible as Literature' "). This is what happened with Homer and the Song of Songs, and also, as we shall see, with the *Book of Poetry*.

From the dozen or so references to the *Book of Poetry* in the Confucian *Analects*, we can see clearly what was to become the orthodox line in traditional Chinese poetics: a moralistic and utilitarian tendency to read all literature as an instrument of achieving perfection both in individual cultivation and in the social order. Confucius once said to his son, "Unless you study the *Odes* you will be ill-equipped to speak" (xvi-

13.141).[1] The use of poetry as a primer of rhetoric reminds us of the pedagogical function of Homer in ancient Greece and of the attitude towards classical literature in Latin Christianity, as set forth by Augustine, that one should read pagan and secular poetry solely in order to acquire the necessary equipment for better understanding Scripture: "for when the sense is absurd if it is taken verbally, it is to be inquired whether or not what is said is expressed in this or that trope which we do not know; and in this way many hidden things are discovered" (104). For Confucius, of course, the study of poetry serves no religious purpose but prepares one for polished moral suasion or diplomatic discourse, or generally for better performance of civic duties. In a famous passage urging his students to study the *Book of Poetry*, Confucius defines the functions of poetry as *xing* (the affective function of giving rise to high spirits), *guan* (cognitive function of revealing social changes), *qun* (communal function of reconciling different interests of social groups), and *yuan* (cathartic function of giving vent to one's sorrow or grievances with a view to appealing to the authorities for rectification).[2] He gives hardly any consideration to the aesthetic value of poetry, for the practical value is all he cares about: "If a man who knows the three hundred *Odes* by heart fails when given administrative responsibilities and proves incapable of exercising his own initiative when sent to foreign states, then what use are the *Odes* to him, however many he may have learned?" (xiii.5.119). Having acquainted ourselves with this typical Confucian pragmatism, we should not feel surprised to find his overall comment on the *Book of Poetry* more apologetic than complimentary: "The *Odes* are three hundred in number. They can be summed up in one phrase, 'swerving not from the right path' " (ii.2.63). The Chinese original of the last phrase can also be rendered as "without evil," and that is indeed the best Confucius can say of poetry.

As one may expect of any anthology of ancient songs, the *Book of Poetry* contains a large number of poems dealing with the joy as well as the pain of love. The *locus classicus* in any discussion of this work is the very first song in the anthology, a love song and perhaps an epithalamium. A few different versions in translation will give us very interesting examples of how this poem is interpreted and how translations are shaped within the hermeneutic circle of text, traditional exegesis

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[1] Lau translates *Poetry* as *Odes*.

[2] See *The Analects*, xvii.9. The interpretation and consequently the translation of the four functions defined by Confucius is still a matter of debate. Lau's version reads: "An apt quotation from the *Odes* may serve to stimulate the imagination, to show one's breeding, to smooth over difficulties in a group and to give expression to complaint" (145). James J. Y. Liu translates the same passage as "It can be used to inspire, to observe, to make you fit for company, to express grievances" (109). For a more detailed discussion of the four terms, see Liu 109-111.

and the translator's present understanding. I first quote Bernhard Karlgren's almost verbatim translation as a basis for further discussion:

Kwan kwan (cries) the ts'ü-kiu bird, on the islet of the river; the beautiful and good girl, she is a good mate for the lord.

Of varying length is the hing waterplant, to the left and the right we catch it; the beautiful and good girl, waking and sleeping he (sought her:) wished for her; he wished for her but did not get her, waking and sleeping he thought of her; longing, longing, he tossed and fidgeted.

Of varying length is the hing waterplant, to the left and the right we gather it; the beautiful and good girl, guitars and lutes (befriend her:) hail her as a friend.

Of varying length is the hing waterplant, to the left and the right we cull it as a vegetable; the beautiful and good girl, bells and drums cheer her. (2)

Confucius himself has chosen to comment on this poem, and his comment naturally smacks of the condescending generosity the great pedagogue must have felt when he smiled at this harmless little love song; he had included it in the three hundred poems (out of a pool of three thousand) inscribed on wooden tablets strung together as a scroll and made into a book. In this song, the Master says, "there is joy without wantonness, and sorrow without self-injury" (iii.20.70). In other words, emotions expressed here are tame and moderate, conformable to the Confucian concept of decorum. The moralistic line thickened as later commentators picked up the suggestion of moderated emotion and stretched it into a complicated reading which sees the poem either as a critique of the improper behavior of King Kang and his queen (11th century B.C.) by setting up the image of proper courtship, or conversely as an encomium of the virtous queen of King Wen (d. 1027 B.C.). Kong Yingda of the Tang dynasty explains that the poem praises the queen for her virtue because she does not think of herself or her own beauty, but only cares about how to present good young ladies and talented young men to serve the King. In this explanation, any emotion in excess becomes wantonness: "when a man loves a woman too much, he becomes lecherous; and when a woman exceeds the proper bounds in seeking man's favors, she becomes wanton in her own fairness," even though the emotion is marital love between man and wife (*Mao Shi Zhushu* 20). In a way this is very similar to the ascetic Christian view that passion is sin in itself, even though marriage is excusable if it is appropriately oriented to have offspring. As C. S. Lewis observes, this is very relevant to the allegorization of love in medieval literature because "according to the medieval view passionate love itself was wicked, and did not cease to be wicked if the object of it were your wife . . . *omnis ardentior amator propriae uxoris adulter est*, passionate love of a man's own wife is adultery" (14-15). Mao Heng, an earlier commentator of our poem, even

claims that because the virtuous queen is content to stay in seclusion like the good ospreys in their nest and abstains from excessive intimacy even with her husband, she sets a good example to help shape the moral order of the world: "When man and wife observe the separation of the sexes, father and son will remain close to each other. When father and son remain close to each other, the king and his minister will have mutual respect. When the king and his minister have mutual respect, all at court will be fair and just. When all at court is fair and just, the king's benevolent influence will shape the whole world" (*Mao Shi Zhushu* 21). The emphasis on the ethicopolitical effect of such a short poem is truly staggering, and to most modern readers this interpretation seems completely tedious, far-fetched, and unwarranted by the text.

Most Western sinologists recognize this long tradition of moralistic exegesis as "allegorical" and feel quite uncomfortable with it. Ironically, however, many of them fail to step out of the huge shadow of this tradition. Among earlier translators, for example, James Legge accepts this view, though he thinks it "not worth while to discuss the view of the older school,—that the subject of the piece is Wen's queen, and that it celebrates her freedom from jealousy, and her anxiety to fill his harem with virtuous ladies." His translation is clearly shaped by the traditional view, of which the first stanza reads:

Hark! from the islet in the stream the voice
Of the fish-hawks that o'er their nest rejoice!
From them our thoughts to that young lady go,
Modest and virtuous, loth herself to show.
Where could be found, to share our prince's state,
So fair, so virtuous, and so fit a mate? (59)

Compared with Karlgren's more literal version, we see immediately that the "girl" becomes "that young lady," and the "lord" (which is already an enhancement of the original meaning of *qunzi*, simply "a respectable man") becomes "our prince." There is no hint in the original that the lady is to "share our prince's state." Similarly, in his French and Latin translations of 1896, Father S. Couvreur takes the poem as sung by palace ladies in praise of the queen: "Les femmes du palais chantent les vertus de Tai Séu, épouse de Wênn wâng." The first stanza in his French version is accordingly rendered thus:

Les *ts'iu kiou* (se répondant l'un à l'autre, crient) *kouan kouan* sur un îlot dans la rivière. Une fille vertueuse (T'ai Seu), qui vivait retirée et cachée (dans la maison maternelle), devient la digne compagne d'un prince sage (Wenn wang). (5)

"La digne compagne d'un prince sage," like Legge's version "to share our prince's state," is a paraphrase of traditional exegesis rather than translation of the actual words. In this century, those sinologists who

are more sensitive to the literary value of the *Book of Poetry* tend to reject the moralistic rationalizations of the commentators. Karlgren's translation (1942-46) which tries to be "as literal as possible" is a significant contribution to this tendency. Arthur Waley, whose translation appeared in 1937, attempts to dissociate the anthology from Confucius, arguing that "the songs are indeed 'Confucian' in the sense that Confucius (who lived c. 500 B.C.) and his followers used them as texts for moral instruction, much as Greek pedagogues used Homer. There is no reason to suppose that Confucius had a hand in forming the collection" (18). Thus his translation of the song under discussion follows fairly closely the original wording:

'Fair, fair,' cry the ospreys
On the island in the river.
Lovely is this noble lady,
Fit bride for our lord.

In patches grows the water mallow;
To left and right one must seek it.
Shy was this noble lady;
Day and night he sought her.

Sought her and could not get her;
Day and night he grieved.
Long thoughts, oh, long unhappy thoughts,
Now on his back, now tossing on to his side.

In patches grows the water mallow;
To left and right one must gather it.
Shy is this noble lady;
With great zithern and little we hearten her.

In patches grows the water mallow;
To left and right one must choose it.
Shy is this noble lady;
With gongs and drums we will gladden her. (81-82)

In an appendix on "allegorical interpretation," Waley recognizes the fact that the allegorization and the use of poems "for a variety of social and educational purposes which had nothing to do with their original intention" actually helped to preserve the songs, especially the love songs which "could only be used for moral instruction if interpreted allegorically" (335, 336). He then remarks that the allegorical interpretation is not confined to China: "Parts of our own Bible have been explained on similar lines, particularly the Song of Solomon and certain of the Psalms" (336). Waley hails the "enormous advances" in sinology since Marcel Granet's 1911 French translation of some of the love songs which, rejecting much of traditional exegesis, discovered the "true nature" of those poems (337).

In a vigorously argued essay on "Allegory, Allegoresis, and the *Classic of Poetry*," Pauline R. Yu questions the validity of labelling traditional Chinese commentary as allegorization. By showing the difference from allegory as variously defined by Western scholars, she first demonstrates that none of the poems in the Chinese anthology is really allegorical. To call the *Book of Poetry* allegory is, to say the least, an anachronism. However, there is a crucial difference between allegorical reading of a non-allegorical work and allegorical writing consciously applying the mode of allegorization in weaving the text. Songs in the Chinese anthology are certainly not conscious allegories, but neither is Homer. As Erich Auerbach says, "the Homeric poems conceal nothing, they contain no teaching and no secret second meaning . . . Later allegorizing trends have tried their arts of interpretation upon [Homer], but to no avail. He resists any such treatment; the interpretations are forced and foreign, they do not crystallize into a unified doctrine" (13-14). For Stephen Barney, "since allegoresis is a matter of critical response rather than a work's intrinsic nature," the allegorical exegesis of the Bible has very little to do with the nature of biblical texts: "there is little if any allegory in the Bible, most Biblical allegoresis is not based on the actual allegorical character of the Bible" (41, 43). However, there is nothing to prevent interpreters from reading a work allegorically, as the traditional allegoresis of Homer and the Bible clearly shows.

One may ask then: are traditional Chinese commentaries allegoresis? The answer, according to Pauline Yu, must be negative, for the traditional commentators "read the poems in the *Classic of Poetry* not as fictional works created ad hoc to create or correspond to some historical reality or philosophical truth, but as literal vignettes drawn from that reality. They are not making the poems refer to something *fundamentally* other—belonging to another plane of existence—than what they say, but are revealing them to be specifically referential. The process is one of *contextualization*, not allegorization" (406). It is true that much traditional interpretation tries to put the poems into a historical context, arguing, for example, that the love song we quoted above praises the virtue of a particular historical figure, the queen of King Wen. Such contextualization, however, seems to me only a means to an end rather than the end itself. That end is obviously to justify the canonicity of the *Book of Poetry*, or as Pauline Yu puts it, "to rationalize the praise which Confucius had lavished on a collection which included some apparently inconsequential and often alarmingly forthright love songs" (407). The ultimate purpose of putting a poem into a quasihistorical context seems to be more than just to view it as some kind of literal vignette of the past; it is rather to transform such a poem into a model of propriety and good conduct, something that carries a peculiar ethico-political import,

as we have seen in Mao's commentary (21). After all, the sum of Confucius's own commentary on the *Book of Poetry* is moralistic rather than historical. Moreover, the past into which the poem is contextualized is not just any part of history, but the legendary model of all history, the reign of King Wen, the founder of a splendid culture of which Confucius sees himself as both preserver and reviver (see Confucius ix.5, xix.22). The well-being of the nation, Confucius believes, depends on following the way of King Wen and returning to the observance of the rites created in those good old days. This belief becomes the final frame of reference in the traditional commentary that " the ancient King used poetry to regulate the proper bond between husbands and wives, to mold filial piety and respect for the elder, to strengthen human relationships, to accomplish education, and to adjust social customs" (*Mao Shi Zhu-shu* 10). Such contextualization is Chinese commentators' strategy of justifying the canonicity of the *Book of Poetry* as one of the Confucian classics, a strategy that relates the poems to a kind of ideal history that incarnates all the essentials of Confucian doctrine. This does not mean that poems in the Chinese tradition are taken as genuine historical records and that there is absolutely no sense of fictionality. Therefore I find it difficult to agree with Pauline Yu when she says that while Western allegorists attempted to find a deeper philosophical or religious sense, "the Chinese exegetes had to demonstrate the literal truth value of the songs—not a metaphysical truth, however, but the truth of this world, an historical context" (410). We know that in his famous dialogue with Wan Zhang, Mencius, the second master in the Confucian tradition, criticized rigid literalism in reading the *Book of Poetry*, arguing for an understanding which goes beyond the literal sense of poems in order to grasp the true meaning. "If one were merely to take the sentences literally," Mencius remarks, "then there is the ode *Yün han* which says,

> Of the remaining multitudes of Chou
> Not a single man survived.

If this is taken to be literal truth, it would mean that not a single Chou subject survived" (5a.4.142). In other words, when the sense is obviously absurd if it is understood literally, one should be aware of the operation of metaphors, hyperboles, and other poetic tropes.

In fact the literal sense is often ignored or distorted in traditional exegesis so that a historical context with moral and political implications may sit comfortably on top of the poetic text. For example, poem 23 in Karlgren's translation reads:

> In the wilds there is a dead deer, with white grass one wraps it up; there is a girl having spring feelings, a fine gentleman entices her.

In the forest there are low shrubby trees, in the wilds there is a dead deer; with white grass one wraps it up and binds it; there is a girl like a jade.

Slowly! Gently! Do not move my kerchief; do not make the dog bark! (13)

It is amusing to see how the priggish commentators stretch the words out of all proportion in order to make this explicitly amorous poem sound like a parable of how good people under King Wen's influence detest improper behavior. Zheng Xuan (127-200) explains that the word *you* ("entice" or "seduce") here really means "to lead" in the sense that "the fine gentleman sends a go-between to lead to the arrangement for marriage"; thus the commentator can purge away the danger of seduction and can read the last stanza not as the girl's hint to her lover, but as her detestation of improprieties. In order to make such a forced interpretation plausible, he has to twist the first verse of this stanza, explaining that "slowly" and "gently" really refer to the slow procedure of marriage arrangement, while leaving that barking dog almost totally unaccounted for (*Mao Shi Zhushu* 124-26). Such far-fetched exegeses spread over traditional commentaries on the *Book of Poetry* and consistently read love songs as about anything but love. Another example is poem 86, a simple song of two stanzas. Karlgren's translation reads:

That crafty youth, he does not talk with me! Yes, it is all your fault, but it makes me unable to eat.

That crafty youth, he does not eat with me! Yes, it is all your fault, but it makes me unable to rest. (57)

The traditional commentary reads the poem as a political satire on the Duke Zhao of Zheng who jeopardized the state by entrusting a notoriously perfidious minister with power, while ignoring the good ones. According to the commentary, the speaker in the poem is not a girl as we might assume, but is a good minister who calls the Duke "that crafty youth" and expresses his deep concern for the destiny of the state (*Mao Shi Zhushu* 409-410).

By superimposing a historical context on the love songs, traditional commentators do not merely give the poems specific referentiality, but try to eliminate any implication of erotic love and to attach to poetry a significance that demonstrates the functions Confucius had defined for it in terms of ethical and political propriety. It is a way of reading very similar to the way the Targumist interprets the Song of Songs as an allegory of Jewish history. Both in the Targum and in traditional Chinese exegesis, the letter is not completely ignored. In rabbinic exegesis, as Loewe points out, "the letter is not, as in Christian exegesis, the potentially jealous stepmother of allegory, but rather her willing handmaid

or research assistant" (159). Woollcombe thus describes the sharp contrast between Rabbinic and Alexandrian allegorism:

> First, the undersense which the rabbis perceived in the Song of Songs does concern the nature of God and his dealings with men—they made no attempt whatever to discover an undersense which would fall outside the field of revelation. Secondly, the Rabbis used the *actual text* of the love-lyrics to describe the divine love. They did not discard the text, once they had found the undersense, as one discards the shell of a nut, having found the kernel. Herein lies the principal difference between the allegorism of Palestine and that of Alexandria. The object of Alexandrian exegesis was to free the spirit of the text from the shell of words in which it was encased, whereas the object of Palestinian exegesis was to use the actual text to describe the activity of God. (54)

James Kugel also regards close attention to textual details as characteristic of rabbinic interpretation: "Even in the most allegorical of rabbinic exegeses, those of the Song of Songs, the focus never shifts from the words of the text" (*Biblical Poetry* 138). However, there is no doubt that rabbinic exegesis is also a kind of allegorical reading since it uses the figurative meaning to reveal the divinity of the biblical texts. In Chinese exegesis, as we have seen, much effort is concentrated on sometimes violent and sometimes ingenious twisting of the literal sense of words. Though I believe that Pauline Yu has overstated the case, her essay is very useful in calling our attention to the relative literalism in Chinese commentaries on the *Book of Poetry*. Even in Christian exegesis, however, the letter is not always regarded as the jealous stepmother of allegory. Thomas Aquinas declares in a famous passage of the *Summa theologica* that "in holy scripture no confusion results, for all the senses are founded on one—the literal—from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those intended in allegory, as Augustine says" (Grant and Tracy 89). Though Aquinas may stand closer to the school of Antioch than to that of the Alexandrians in his approach to the biblical text, he does not so much reject allegorical interpretation as insist on taking the literal sense as the only legitimate ground for allegorization. If allegoresis means a way of reading or mode of interpretation that builds up a *Gestalt* of non-literal in contradistinction to, but not necessarily to the exclusion of, the literal sense of the text, then there is good reason to characterize the way Chinese commentators read the *Book of Poetry* as allegoresis or allegorization, comparable to the Western allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs, provided we bear in mind the essential difference between the ethico-political nature of traditional Chinese commentaries and the religious nature of biblical exegesis.

Robert Grant sees Aquinas's insistence on the primacy of the literal sense as "theology's declaration of independence from the allegorical method" (90). Indeed, since the thirteenth century, as Kugel argues,

the gulf between the Bible and human writing was shrinking. On the one hand there was, under Aquinas's influence, a revival of interest in the literal sense and the Hebraists' emphasis on the importance of the original Hebrew texts and the inadequacy of translation. On the other hand, the use of allegory in poetry as human writing undermined the uniqueness of biblical allegory in its predominance of the spiritual over the bodily sense: "Thus, if the Bible's uniqueness resided in its spiritual sense, this uniqueness was under double attack, increasingly neglected and undermined by Hebraizing commentators, and in the meantime encroached upon at the other side by poets of secular and (still worse!) Divine intention" (Kugel, *Biblical Poetry* 18-19). For Luther, Calvin, and other reformers, allegorization was of little use in dogmatic theology (see Grant and Tracy 94-96). Literary and stylistic studies of the Bible began to develop, and greater appreciation of the biblical language in its own right made allegory less and less essential. In his lectures on biblical poetry (1753), Bishop Robert Lowth still understands the Song of Solomon as an allegory of love between Christ and the Church, but he terms it a "mystical allegory," an allegory "which is founded upon the basis of history," while his interest lies entirely in the imagery and the poetic excellence of the Canticle (339). Lowth's Latin lectures were later translated into English and published with additional notes by several hands, thus allowing us to know some of the responses the author received in his time. A long note by John David Michaelis, a professor of philosophy at Göttingen, challenges the notion that the Song is an allegory, arguing against those "profound reasoners" that "the chaste and conjugal affections so carefully implanted by the Deity in the human heart, and upon which so great a portion of human happiness depends, are not unworthy of a muse fraught even with Divine inspiration" (346). When the poetic and stylistic features of biblical language become an object of study, and love and marriage as part of God's plan for human life are considered a worthy theme for a divinely inspired poet, then the Song of Solomon hardly needs any allegorical interpretation.

The demotion of allegory in the modern West can be traced back to the eighteenth century, especially to the negative reaction to Winckelmann's classicism in Germany and the rise of the symbol as a counter-concept to allegory. In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer offers a succinct synopsis of the history of these two concepts and insightful discussions of their theoretical values. He shows how Kant's concept of symbolic representation paved the way for an aesthetic evaluation of the symbol, and, after Goethe, Schelling, Solger and some other German thinkers of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, how the word symbol came to signify the inward unity of the idea and its appearance

as distinct from allegory, which was understood as indicating a mechanical relationship between the idea and its representation by means of something external and artificial. The romantic notion of art as an unconscious creation of the genius finally discredited allegory, on the grounds that it was merely a convention. "The concept and concern of allegory is closely bound up with dogmatics," says Gadamer; "the moment art freed itself from all dogmatic bonds and could be defined by the unconscious production of genius, allegory inevitably became aesthetically questionable" (71). Symbol is complicated with a disproportion of form and essence, which gives rise to that indeterminate quality, that undecidability, peculiar to all works of art and literature, but allegory is simplistic, a shell that contains a meaning alien to its form. "Allegory," says Paul Ricoeur, "is a rhetorical procedure that can be eliminated once it has done its job. Having ascended the ladder, we can then descend it" (56).

This concept of allegory, however, is somewhat narrow and limited, what Northrop Frye calls "naive allegory," while the more sophisticated "continuous allegory" like *The Divine Comedy* or *The Faerie Queene* is "still a structure of images, not of disguised ideas, and commentary has to proceed with it exactly as it does with all other literature, trying to see what precepts and examples are suggested by the imagery as a whole" (90). Many critics are anxious to treat allegory like a symbol, emphasizing its literal signification as ontologically meaningful, if allegory is indeed to be conceived as a literary form. In giving advice on how to read allegories, C. S. Lewis precisely does not want the reader to descend the allegorical ladder after he has climbed it:

> When we have seen what an allegory signifies, we are always tempted to attend to the signification in the abstract and to throw aside the allegorical imagery as something which has now done its work. But this is not the way to read an allegory. Allegory, after all, is simile seen from the other end; and when we have seen the point of simile we do not throw it away . . . You cannot find out except by reading them as they are meant to be read; by keeping steadily before you both the literal and the allegorical sense and not treating the one as a mere means to the other but as its imaginative interpretation; by testing for yourself how far the concept really informs the image and how far the image really lends poetic life to the concept. (124-25)

Auerbach also warns us that the allegorical reading of the Bible tends to suppress the sensory occurrence in a typological framework, which implies "the danger that the visual element of the occurrences might succumb under the dense texture of meanings" (48).

However, the most salient characteristic of modern scholarship on the Song of Songs has been a general tendency to reject allegory and freely admit the application of the Song to human physical love. As Marvin Pope says:

> Modern research has tended to relate the origins and background of the Songs to the sacral sexual rites of ancient Near Eastern fertility cults wherein the issues of life and death were the crucial concern. In working through the Song word by word and verse by verse, and in reviewing the interpretations that have been imposed upon it, the impression has grown to conviction that the cultic interpretation, which has been vehemently resisted from its beginnings, is best able to account for the erotic imagery. Sexuality is a basic human interest and the affirmation that 'God is Love' includes all meanings of both words. (17)

Archaeological findings, anthropological studies, and a renewed interest in the myths and folklore of the ancient Near East have contributed to an exciting new understanding of the Bible in its historical and oriental context. Scholars have vigorously traced the possible contacts between ancient India and Mesopotamia in King Solomon's time and have related the Canticle to the Indian sacred songs in which erotic love often has a religious significance, symbolizing man's longing for god. Today even Christian exegetes, both Catholics and Protestants, tend to take the obvious sense of the Song as the basis for any sacralization and regard the Song as representing both sexual and sacred love, both Eros and Agape. As Helmut Gollwitzer argues, "If the Song is simply about human sexual love, then its inclusion in the *Bible* is itself a demand that the church and the Christians should finally establish an unabashed relation with sex and eros, and it unabashedly commands us: *rejoice that there is such a thing*. Sexual desire ['diese Lust'], one of the most powerful and marvelous emotions, is a wonderful gift from our Creator ['ein wunderbares Geschenk des Schöpfers']" (21). What a great change from traditional views! Heine once told the story of the nightingale of Basel: how some of the pious clerics and monks at the Ecumenical Council in May 1433 condemned a nightingale in the woods near Basel for luring them away from their theological discussions with sweet song. "This story," says our poet, "needs no comment. It bears the horrible impress of a time that would denounce all that was sweet and lovely as diabolical" (58). In the reunion of Eros and Agape, Gollwitzer now gladly announces the coming of a new age when human beings do not have to apologize for their desire for love. He finds in the Song of Songs a free expression of this reunion, a "Magna Charta of humanity," and reminds us with Karl Barth that "We should not wish to take it out of the canon. We should not act as if it were not in the canon. Neither should we spiritualize it as if everything in the canon could only have spiritual meaning . . . The most profound interpretation here might well be none but the most natural one" (Barth, in Gollwitzer 62).

The dismantling of allegorical reading of the *Book of Poetry* likewise marked the decline of the Confucian tradition in Chinese history. It was scarcely possible to read the love songs in that canonical anthology as love songs until Confucianism came under attack in the new cultural

movement at the dawn of China's modern era. The forerunners of the new culture courageously attempted to shake the bedrock of Confucian doctrine and to redefine their own relations with tradition. Time-honored views were questioned and traditional values rejected, the language spoken by the common people became an entirely new medium for literary expression. Literature began to claim its freedom from the traditional notion that it was a mere vehicle for dogma. All this can be clearly seen in one of the most influential and ambitious projects to form a new perspective of ancient Chinese culture—the collection of iconoclastic papers in seven volumes known as *Gu Shi Bian*, in which the well-known historian Gu Jiegang and many others scrutinize ancient books and documents in order to formulate a critique of tradition and history. Volume 3 discusses the *Book of Changes* and the *Book of Poetry* with the express purpose of setting scholars free from the shackles of traditional Confucian exegeses. Gu Jiegang compares the *Book of Poetry* to an ancient stone tablet buried in the thicket of exegetical grass, and takes on the difficult task of cutting the weeds in order to recover the true nature of poetry as poetry. As Gu points out, the problem of the *Book of Poetry* lies in its canonization as a Confucian classic. The few scholars like Wang Bo who realized that many songs in the *Book* were love songs would take them out of the canon: "He would read the *Book of Poetry* only because it was a holy classic; now that he found in it so many improper poems that would taint the classic, he would naturally propose to exclude them from the *Book* in order to keep it clean" (407). How closely this resembles those detractors of the Song of Songs in the Christian tradition who deny its canonicity precisely because they are able to recognize it as a love song! Not surprisingly, when the *Book of Poetry* no longer needs to be regarded as a Confucian classic in order to be highly appreciated, allegorical interpretation inevitably lost its *raison d'être*.

Both Chinese scholars and Western sinologists see in the traditional commentaries on the *Book of Poetry* an exegetical strategy similar to that employed in commentaries on the Song of Songs, a strategy they reject as distorting allegorization. Canonicity is seen as a burden or, as Zheng Zhenduo puts it, a misfortune: "While the status of *Poetry* was enhanced through canonization, its true nature and value were obscured by the Confucian scholars of the Han dynasty with nonsensical distortions. This is exactly like the excellent Song of Solomon which, being unfortunately included in the Bible, lost its true nature and value for thousands of years!" (1:37). In a vigorous attack on the influential "Preface to the Mao text of the *Book of Poetry*," Zheng calls traditional commentaries "layer upon layer of exegetical debris," from which it is the primary task of modern scholarship to rescue the *Book* and bring

it to the light of new literary studies (in Gu, 3:382-401). Once the exegetical debris had been swept away, scholarship was at long last able to make significant progress. The seminal essays written in the nineteen thirties and forties by the poet and scholar Wen Yiduo provide brilliant examples of mythological and archetypal criticism in which archaeology, anthropology, folklore and the study of literature are brought together to shed new light on ancient songs and poems. In his essay on the archetypal image of fish, for example, Wen Yiduo argues that fish, fishing, and the cooking and eating of fish, which often occur in Chinese poems ranging from the ancient *Book of Poetry* to modern folksongs, are frequently euphemistic expressions for sexual desire or the sexual act on the ground that fish are "a species most capable of multiplication" (135). Obviously such a new direction in literary study runs counter to the traditional mode of interpretation and makes it hardly possible for moralistic allegorization to survive. Today the exegetical debris has finally been cleared away, and many readers of these Chinese poems find it hard to believe that such far-fetched interpretations could have existed at all.

From the survey and comparison of biblical exegeses on the Song of Songs and traditional Chinese commentaries on the *Book of Poetry*, we turn now to some inferences bearing on the nature of allegoresis and its relations with ideology. "Allegories are the natural mirrors of ideology," says Angus Fletcher in his thorough study of allegory as a mode of symbolic representation (368). If this is true of allegories as works of literature and art, it is even truer of allegoresis as a mode of interpretation that works to bring a text into line with certain ideological presumptions. When texts like the Homeric epics, the Song of Solomon, and the *Book of Poetry* are canonized for religious, moral, political or other purposes, the community that holds one of them as a canonical text would naturally expect of it a certain meaning or function, but a meaning and function it probably did not have until its canonization. Allegorical interpretation becomes the only way to attribute such meaning to the text, and hermeneutic devices are here readily laid bare, since the allegorical meaning is felt to be defined not so much by the text itself as by the function expected of a canonical text as such. This is quite evident in Augustine's interesting discussion of how to solve textual problems in Scripture. When the reader of the biblical text faces semantic or syntactic ambiguities, or ambiguities in punctuation, pronunciation, and so on, the hermeneutic principle that guides him, Augustine says, must first of all be the rule of faith, and then the context of the parts that precede and follow the ambiguous passages. The second half of this principle is philological, dealing with matters of a technical nature, whereas the first is obviously ideological, providing the real foundation of interpretation

and the authority to which the reader must ultimately appeal in case of doubt. Augustine warns the reader not to take figurative expressions as literal, nor to take literal ones as though they were figurative. The reader must then be able to determine at the very start whether a locution is literal or figurative. According to Augustine, the rule that helps him to determine such matters is that "whatever appears in the divine Word that does not literally pertain to virtuous behavior or to the truth of faith you must take to be figurative" (III.x.14.87-88). In other words, the very location of textual problems is determined by the truth of faith; and it is ideological presumptions that enable the reader not only to identify passages that need allegorical interpretation, but also to find the correct solution.

From this we can see that what may lose validity and become questionable for later generations or readers who hold different views or articles of faith is not allegoresis as such, but the ideological presumptions that inform a particular allegorization. We resent traditional commentaries on the *Book of Poetry* not just because they are allegorical readings, nor even because they so violently distort what the poems seem to say, but because they read poems in such a way as to make them nothing but disguised propaganda for ideologies we now reject. On the other hand, we may find Wen Yiduo's reading of fish and fishing as sexual symbols extremely interesting, even though such a reading is certainly allegorical in its own way. The fact is that whenever we try to understand a text and describe "what it means," we begin to give allegorical readings in a broad sense, because to understand is not just to know what the text literally says, but to make sense of what it says to us in our immediate cultural context; and to articulate what we understand is always to give a simulacrum of the structure of meaning which inevitably contains something we contribute to the text. That is to say, allegoresis as articulation of our understanding and its ideological presumptions is indeed a common hermeneutic phenomenon. When a powerful system of ideology like Christianity in the West or Confucianism in China dominates the mentality of a community in a certain period of time, a corresponding system of allegorical exegesis inevitably arises to form the frame of reference in the transmission of culture, and assumes a quasi-canonical status. To challenge the authoritative exegesis is then nothing less than to challenge the whole system of ideological orthodoxy. The ecclesiastical history of the West is full of revealing examples, and as Froehlich shows, it takes "nothing less than dogmatic *condemnation*" at ecumenical Councils to suppress literal interpretations of the Bible (28 ff.). In the Chinese tradition, interpretation of the *Book of Poetry* was confined within the Confucian ideology for thousands of years, and the authority of its orthodox commentators was

not successfully overthrown until the twentieth century. When we look back at the long history of what seems to us mistaken allegoresis, what becomes interesting is how the apparently erroneous allegorization became a model for reading all texts, and how it shaped not only the way texts were read and understood but the way they were written. Moreover, the relations between authoritative allegoresis and orthodox ideology can help us see that interpretation is always historically conditioned, and that we now understand differently because we live in a different time in which old systems of ideology are no longer valid and distortions of the text no longer tolerable. We may now say that what seems so wrong with traditional interpretation is not interpretation itself, but tradition.

Having said this, however, I believe it is important to point out that not all readings are equally valid simply because all are allegorical in one way or another. While some critics would argue that interpretation is unabashedly political, that interpretive strategies will decide what we see as text in the first place, and that ultimately it is a matter of power rather than reason, I believe that the plain literal sense of the text must always act as a restraint to keep interpretation from going wild, providing a basis on which we may judge the relative validity of particular readings and exegeses. To put it simply, one reading is better than another if it accounts for more details of the text, bringing the letter into harmony with the spirit, rather than into opposition to it. Are we not justified then in rejecting allegorical readings of the Song of Songs or the love poems in the *Book of Poetry* on the ground that such readings keep the spirit alive by killing the letter? However, the letter never really dies and the spirit without flesh and blood is only a pale spectre. A perhaps more constructive suggestion that arises from our discussion is that, putting the text into both its own history and the present context and drawing on all information available, we should take both letter and spirit into consideration so that we may finally arrive at the ideal of interpretation. The dichotomy of letter and spirit is a false one, for the two need not exclude each other; it is not necessary to kill the body in order that the soul may survive. If the suppression of the letter has been characteristic of centuries of misreading, the future of a more valid interpretation lies in the true catholicity of hermeneutic principles, the healthy reunion of the letter and the spirit.[3]

Harvard University

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